

Most Holy Trinity Sunday - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity describes the unique ways that we experience God's presence in our lives. It is a confusing doctrine, even for adults, because it seems to imply three gods who are yet One God. When we speak of the mystery of creator and creation, we can only apprehend that mystery by analogy, poetry, and symbolic language. What we describe with the doctrine of the Trinity is an experience of God.

First, we know God through His creation and through our own creative acts. When we make something, whether it be a piece of furniture or a special meal, we are in touch with God as we shape something into a different form. The intense fulfillment of childbirth is another example of creative time. When we are creative, we feel whole and fulfilled. God is creating through us, and we have a sense of being an instrument for the Divine. We call this way of experiencing God "Father".

Secondly, we know God in the sense expressed in 1 John 4:16 "God is love, and He who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." God is as close to us as the healing love that is shared among His people. It was Jesus who proclaimed this reality by the power of love He showed in His life, death, and resurrection. Using the metaphors of biblical language, we could say that we "meet Christ" in the acts of love and healing. We know God through the "flesh and blood" of His presence in our lives and through the power of love that leads us into deeper life. We call this way of experiencing and knowing God "Son", since Jesus is called the Son of God.

Finally, we feel the spirit and are "turned on" to God's power. We know God through the inspiration that comes to us. Our secular use of the word "spirit" describes very well the experiences of God we feel through spiritedness and inspiration. When I say that certain words "came to me" in a moment of crisis, I feel I am describing the experience of receiving inspiration. As Christians we simply add the word "Holy" to the everyday word "Spirit" to define the spirited way of knowing God in our lives. Thus we can say that we know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The dogma of the Trinity has not always been clearly defined. In fact, the word "trinity" does not appear in Holy Scripture (neither does the word "pope", "purgatory", or "catholic" for that matter – as our fundamentalist brothers and sisters will be quick to point out). It is not even clear how the doctrine was understood in the time of the apostles. The oldest doctrinal formulation of the Church's belief in the Trinity is in the Apostle's Creed, which, in the form of the ancient Roman baptismal symbol, served as the basis of catechumenical instruction and as a baptismal confession of faith since the second century.

In the early Church, Christians began to ponder the mystery of God's unity and the Trinity and attempted to explain more precisely the relationships among the persons of the Trinity. These efforts led to many errors in the early years, and most of those who tried to describe the relationships ended in heresy. Even the great theologians Tertullian and Origen stumbled into error in their attempts to explain the relationship between the Father and the Son. Arius, around the year A.D. 300, concluded that the Word (logos) of God was created by the Father to be the instrument of all other creation. The Word, or God the Son, was a perfect creature to Arius, but a creature nonetheless. Were this account true, then only the Father would be truly God, and the Son and Holy Spirit would then be divine only through adoption by the Father. In such a case, the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity would become merely a descending hierarchy with the Father extending His grace to the Son and the Holy Spirit, rather than a communion of co-equal and co-eternal persons, who together are the one, true God. Arianism finally died out almost 500 years later at the end of the 7th century. Arianism has been revived by the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny that Jesus is God.

The creed which we call the Nicene Creed originated at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. It was probably introduced into the western liturgy by the regional Council of Toledo in A.D. 589. That text however, was a Latin translation of the Greek original and came to include a small addition which resulted in major theological disputes: namely that the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and the Son, rather than only from the Father. This matter continues to divide Catholic and Protestant Christians from Eastern Orthodox Christians.

1st Reading - Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9

Our first reading for today describes our Three-in-One God as "a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity," who pardons our wickedness and sins and receives us as their own. This is what the Trinity does for us.

The events leading up to today's first reading are as follows:

Moses has led the people out of Egypt and through the desert to Mount Sinai. This journey took about three months during which time they have encountered bad water which Moses, at God's command, sweetened by casting a tree into it; they have run out of food and God has provided manna and quail; they have no water and Moses, at God's command, strikes a rock with his staff and water flows forth.

Upon arriving at Mount Sinai they set up camp and Moses receives from God the words to speak to the Israelites: "Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites." (Exodus 19:5-6). Moses told the people, through their elders, all that God had told him and the people replied "Everything the LORD has said, we will do." (Exodus 19:8). Moses told this

to God who further instructed Moses who then consecrated the people and they washed their clothes (purified them) and they were instructed to abstain from sexual relations for three days at which time God would come down upon the mountain and they will hear Him speaking to Moses.

Three days later, God comes down upon the mountain in thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud and the people are afraid to approach (the inference is that they have not abstained from sexual relations). God then gives Moses the ten commandments orally along with other instructions and then summons Moses alone to ascend the mountain. Moses ascends and remains on the mountain for forty days during which time he receives the ten commandments in stone.

Toward the end of his stay on the mountain, the people prevailed upon Aaron (Moses' elder brother) to fashion the golden calf. God became angry and was set to destroy the people and raise from Moses a great nation but Moses reminded God of His covenant with Abraham and God relented. Moses then descended the mountain, caught the people in their revelry, and smashed the stone tablets. The Levites then ordained themselves by slaying three thousand of their kinsmen and neighbors (those who had been partaking in the revelry before the statue). God then commands Moses to make two new tablets and bring them up the mountain.

^{4b} Early the next morning he went up Mount Sinai as the LORD had commanded him, taking along the two stone tablets. ⁵ Having come down in a cloud, the LORD stood with him there and proclaimed his name, "LORD." ⁶ Thus the LORD passed before him and cried out, "The LORD, the LORD, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity."

The missing verse is "Continuing his kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but punishing children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for their fathers' wickedness!" This omitted verse echoes the last part of the first commandment which the people have violated (Exodus 20:4-6; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9-10).

⁸ Moses at once bowed down to the ground in worship. ⁹ Then he said, "If I find favor with you, O Lord, do come along in our company. This is indeed a stiff-necked people; yet pardon our wickedness and sins, and receive us as your own."

When God had recalled His covenant with Abraham, He had relented in His punishment but had said that He would no longer accompany the people but would send an angel to lead them (Exodus 33:2-3). Again Moses interceded and asked God to accompany them and God relented (Exodus 33:15-17). The last two sentences of our reading reiterate that request.

2nd Reading - 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Our reading today comes from the final three verses of Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians. These final words form a greeting and an exhortation to the hearers.

¹¹ Finally, brothers [and sisters], rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Saint Paul often ends a letter in this way, perhaps transporting to his epistle the liturgical gesture which was used at the Lord's Supper according to Justin Martyr, or adapting the customary method of greeting a rabbi (1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Peter 5:14).

“What is a holy kiss? It is one that is not hypocritical, like the kiss of Judas. The kiss is given in order to stimulate love and instill the right attitude in us toward each other. When we return after an absence, we kiss each other, for our souls hasten to bond together. But there is something else which might be said about this. We are the temple of Christ, and when we kiss each other we are kissing the porch and entrance of the temple.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* 30,2

All the holy ones greet you.

Most Protestant translations (and the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition) number this sentence as verse 13, resulting in one more verse than the other Catholic translations. The “saints” or “holy ones” are thought to be the members of the Macedonian churches. This letter is thought to have been composed in Macedonia in the autumn of A.D. 57 after he had left Ephesus. Generally, more persons are associated with Paul in his final greetings than in his words of address. For example, only Timothy is addressed in this letter.

¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you.

In all of the Pauline epistles, this is the richest and most instructive final blessing. Paul explicitly wishes everything necessary for the Corinthians' salvation. The Trinitarian distinction of Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit is noteworthy, as is the co-location of the Spirit with Jesus and the Father, who are clearly persons. The naming of Jesus first is probably due to the familial Pauline blessing “May the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (1 Corinthians 16:23; Romans 16:20; Galatians 6:18; Philippians 4:23; etc.).

“If there is one grace, one peace, one love and one fellowship on the part of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, surely there is one operation, and where there is one operation, certainly the power cannot be divided or the substance separated.” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 381), *The Holy Spirit* 1,12,13]

Gospel - John 3:16-18

Our reading for today comes from the much larger story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is mentioned only in John's gospel (in chapter 3 and also in 7:50 and 19:39); however, the name was a common one. Although the Sanhedrin (the Jewish governing body that was recognized by the Romans), was composed mainly of Sadducees, it also contained Pharisees among its members (Acts 5:34). John 3:1 calls him a “ruler of the

Jews” which probably means he was a member of the Sanhedrin. John 19:39 says he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea (also a member of the Sanhedrin according to Mark 15:43) to claim and bury Jesus’ body. As a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a rabbi (John 3:10 calls him a “teacher of Israel”), he represents the quintessential Jew. Jesus is addressing Nicodemus in our gospel reading for today as we hear Saint John give us the essence of the Trinity’s work for us: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die but may have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world that it might be saved through Him.” This is how much the Trinity loves us!

¹⁶ For God so loved the world

The only explanation that we shall ever have of the gift of eternal life made possible for us in the redemption achieved in Christ is the incredible love of God for the world. Although alienated from God, the world is not evil in itself, and remains the object of divine compassion. The “world” for John is the world of men and their affairs, which is a world subject to sin and darkness.

that he gave his only Son,

Saint John expresses the gratuity of God’s love, extending even to this extreme.

so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

The question of Christ may be resolved only in belief and eternal life, or in rejection and destruction; there is no third alternative.

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Christ has been sent into the world to bring eternal life.

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,

Belief is not merely acknowledging Jesus as personal Lord and Savior, but living out that belief by doing “whatever He tells you” [Mary’s last words in Scripture, (John 2:5)] no matter how bizarre they may sound [“You must eat my flesh and drink my blood” (John 6:51-58)].

but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The “name” in Jewish society is more than an artificial tag that distinguishes one person from another – the name has an identity with the bearer and is capable of acting or receiving in his place. When baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the person becomes a member of God’s family and is invested with the power and authority of that family. He who rejects the name rejects all that it entails and already stands condemned.

The Trinity is our truth and holiness, our mercy, kindness and fidelity, our grace and fellowship, our love, our eternal life, and our salvation. What wonderful works the Trinity does for us!

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